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The European Union in Northern Cyprus: Conceptualising the Avoidance of Contested States

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Introduction

Unrecognised (also known as contested) states, i.e. entities that pursue or maintain independent statehood over a defined territory and which are not members of the UNⁱ, are at the heart of some of the world's and Europe's most intractable conflicts. The European Union (EU) has engaged with this type of entities and conflicts in many different ways. Apart from bringing Cyprus and the unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in the EU, the Enlargement of 2004 redefined the borders of the Union and promoted a 'geographical imagination' of a wider neighbourhood that it should engage with (Bialasiewicz et al. 2009). This gave new geopolitical importance to the many secessionist conflicts of the post-Soviet space that have given birth to unrecognised states, including Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh. In addition, the EU is also involved in Africa, which hosts similar disputes (Western Sahara, Somaliland) and for years, has been involved with state- building in Palestine and Kosovo, which, although relatively more recognised, they are still far from full recognition and UN membership. More recently, the Ukraine crisis in 2014 and secession efforts in Luhansk and Donetsk show the ongoing importance of unrecognised statehood for European politics and securityⁱⁱ.

Partly responding to these developments, many scholars have investigated the EU's involvement in conflicts, including those that relate to unrecognised states (For example: Coppieters et al. 2004, Tocci 2008). Hughes (2010) has offered an edition of works on the Balkans, post-soviet space but also the Arab-Israeli conflict and Africa, while the edition by Wolff and Whitman (2012) added more case studies that are often neglected within EU literature, such as Afghanistan. Yet, these works do not elaborate on specificities of unrecognised states and their significance for conflict and international security. There is some literature on major state-building projects like Kosovo and Palestine, which, however, does not make important inferences with regards to the relevance of unrecognised statehood (e.g. Tansey 2007, Turner 2011, Bouris 2014). Oppositely, with few notable but mostly case-driven exceptions (e.g. Papadimitriou and Petrov 2012 with reference to Kosovo, Kyris 2015 with reference to the TRNC), little has been said about how the EU engages with unrecognised states that, unlike Palestine or Kosovo, it has less appetite to endorse or assist their state legitimacy.

Unrecognised states enjoy more attention from scholars of broader international politics, where a range of works have reflected on their characteristics (e.g. Geldenhuys 2009, Carspensen and Stansfield 2011, Caspersen 2012), political systems (Berg and Mölder 2012, Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2012), also with regard to conflict resolution (King 2001), democratisation (e.g. Carspensen 2011, Voller 2013), or how the international community has reacted to their self-declaration (e.g. Pegg 1998, Lynch 2004, Musson 2008, Fabry 2009, Ker-Lindsay 2012). Some authors have offered important insights into the so-called international 'engagement without recognition' of these entities (Cooley and Mitchell 2010, Ker-Lindsay 2015, Ker-Lindsay and Berg 2018, see also last section), especially in the context of humanitarian aid and peace processes (Caspersen and Herrberg 2010, Berg and Pegg 2016). Yet, because of the dominance of works from the disciplines of international relations or law (e.g. Grant 1999, Crawford 2007, Coggins 2011) the situation on the ground of unrecognised states and implications for EU engagement have not been systematically theorised.

In this regard, we can identify a series of interrelated gaps in the literature with reference to a) the EU and unrecognised states, b) especially those that, unlike Kosovo or Palestine, remain largely unrecognised (see later for differences between variant types) and c) more internal characteristics of statehood (authority and control of the government, what we could call 'empirical statehood') and their significance. As a result, a more systematic conceptualisation of unrecognised states, also with reference to EU engagement, is missing. In this regard, this article explores how characteristics of unrecognised statehood influence the EU's engagement and, in particular, investigates the largely unrecognised TRNC in order to complement the literature on state-building that has focused on unrecognised states with more extensive recognition.

As such, this is an empirically-driven but largely inductive and concept-oriented study of the TRNC case. A controlled historical analysis of the TRNC aims to develop causal explanations that might be generalised across a greater number of similar cases (George and Bennet 2005) of unrecognised states. Therefore, attention is paid more on the causal links between characteristics of statehood (independent variable) and EU approaches (dependent variable) in order to provide some lessons for other unrecognised states, rather than a detailed account of the process that links these variables (see also Dessler cited in George and Bennett 2005). Lastly, the TRNC is an ideal case study because, following the EU accession of Cyprus, it is the largely unrecognised state that has come closest to the EU, which has meant greater engagement and more researchable data. Building on years-long research on the case study (see also Kyris 2014, 2015, 2017), data has been collected from policy papers, evaluation reports but also from semi-structured interviews with EU and Turkish Cypriot elites including during five separate fieldwork trips in Brussels and Cyprus (two in 2009, two in 2016, 2018), which allowed the triangulation of findings as well as offering explanations of EU approaches, therefore adding to the establishment of causal links (Van Era 1997, 65).

Through this case study analysis and in the next section of this paper, I use the case study to inductively identify the way in which the EU is engaging with largely unrecognised states, an approach that I call 'state avoidance'. Informed by existing literature on conflict and the EU in particular, I group my findings into four main elements of this approach: a) *sui generis* management of unrecognised borders, b) informal engagement with officials of the unrecognised state, c) replacement of public authorities with non-state actors and d) extensive engagement with civil society. In the next and last section, I analyse how this approach is informed by two characteristics of the TRNC as a largely unrecognised state: the extensive lack of recognition and the de facto presence of empirical statehood in terms of effective government authority and control. I then contrast state avoidance to statebuilding approaches, in cases such as Kosovo and Palestine that are the mirror image of cases similar to the TRNC: i.e. less empirical statehood when the EU started being involved on the ground combined with more, but still far from full, international recognition. I consequently make the argument for a broader conceptualisation of the phenomenon of unrecognised states, allowing for variation in both the degree of recognition and of empirical statehood. As such, the article combines a discussion of rich empirical findings and inductive concept-building and advances a broader conceptualisation of unrecognised states, which is conducive to understanding and further researching the phenomenon, especially as far as engagement from the EU is concerned.

The EU in Cyprus and the TRNC

Cyprus gained independence in 1960 but the failure of the two communities to cooperate under a unitary state led to conflict and eventual territorial and administrative division: a UN buffer zone, the so-called 'Green Line', divides the island between Greek Cypriots in the south, who now dominate the once bi-communal RoC, and Turkish Cypriots in the north and under the separatist TRNCⁱⁱⁱ. Since then, numerous UN-led peace efforts have tried to establish a federation that will replace the RoC (Richmond 2001) but, given this was not possible before EU accession, the island joined the EU divided (Kyris 2015). This created a unique geopolitical situation: while the entire country is considered EU

territory, the northern part is beyond the control of the Greek Cypriot-led RoC, which is the state recognised as EU member. In this regard and in spite of some initial links with the Turkish Cypriots, the EU's involvement in northern Cyprus mostly started with the EU accession in 2004 and today continues with two main instruments: the Green Line Regulation, which regulates trade between the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots, and the Financial Aid Regulation, which aims at the financial and technical assistance of Turkish Cypriots, and their preparation for implementation of EU law, if and when a reunified state will replace the RoC as an EU member state. In absence of Turkish Cypriot participation in institutions like the European Council or the Council of the EU, where the Greek Cypriots represent the RoC, the European Commission has been the main interlocutor of Turkish Cypriots through its role in implementing the two regulations, although there was also a short-lived (2010-2015) European Parliament (EP) High Level Contact Group for the Relations with the Turkish Cypriot Community for a more political engagement with the locals (Kyris 2013).

This EU engagement has faced significant limitations because of the unique political and institutional situation in Cyprus and the TRNC. The Financial Aid Regulation is a seemingly typical instrument of EU assistance in the context of preparing for implementation of the *acquis communautaire*, the body of EU law. Yet, while usually EU funding is implemented through national authorities, this was not possible in this case, because neither the RoC has effective control over northern Cyprus nor the TRNC could be seen as the national counterpart so as to host an EU delegation. In terms of operationalisation, the non-recognition of the TRNC has not allowed the EU to develop certain capacity-building activities that could assist with implementation. Questions are also raised as to whether liability of projects that are funded by the EU can be transferred to the unrecognised TRNC authorities (Court of Auditors 2012, 1). All these relate to issues of international recognition and the EU's apparent reluctance to engage in fear of recognising by implication (interview with European Commission official, 2009). In this case, the EU seems to advance the sovereignty of the RoC rather than the unrecognised state and unlike what we see in state-building projects of Kosovo or Palestine- I discuss this in greater detail in the next section.

Yet, the most significant example of how the lack of recognition has compromised engagement is the EU proposal for a preferential trade agreement. By far the most ambitious initiative with regard to the Turkish Cypriots, the proposal was prepared by the European Commission after the UN-proposed plan for the reunification of Cyprus was rejected by the Greek Cypriots in April 2004 and sealed the accession of a divided island into the EU a month later. The main objective of the proposal is to lift the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots, who, unlike the Greek Cypriots, favoured reunification in the ballot box, and also encourage eventual reunification of Cyprus by assisting Turkish Cypriot development (European Commission 2004). Yet, the proposal is yet to be ratified by the European Council, where the RoC objects its implementation on the grounds that would imply recognition of the TRNC (interview with MEP 2009, interview with KTTO member A' 2009).

In spite of and perhaps because of all the challenges analysed so far, the EU has sought to devise alternative ways in which the Green Line and Financial Aid regulations would be better implemented, which are analysed below. Findings have been grouped into four main elements, informed by the existing literature on unrecognised states and related conflicts. First, analysis focuses on the management of the *de facto* but unrecognised border between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, with a view to contribute to the literature that has relatively neglected unliterary-erected boundaries in favour of recognised borders (see for example Newman 2001). Secondly, EU engagement with reference to public authorities but also civil society is explored. Looking at public authorities seems appropriate for exploring the issues of limited recognition and, drawing on studies that have focused on engagement with authorities from unrecognised states (e.g. Pegg 1998, Ker-Lindsay 2015, Kyris 2015) findings have been grouped under two different headlines, one exploring how the EU deals with unrecognised state authorities, and a second one elaborating on unique ways in which the EU has tried to avoid interaction with them. Finally, the focus on civil society is informed by the fact a significant number of works highlight civil society as a main interlocutor of the international community with

similar conflicts (e.g. Kyris 2013, Berg and Pegg 2016, Hoch, Kopeček and Baar 2017), but this article adds to the discussion by more systematically exploring the link between support to civil society and unrecognised statehood.

a) Sui Generis Management of Unrecognised Borders

Findings suggest that the lack of international recognition of the TRNC has major geopolitical consequences for EU engagement and the way in which the unrecognised border between the RoC and the TRNC has been managed. More specifically and whereas the Green Line Regulation explicitly states that the Green Line, the UN buffer zone that separates the two communities into two separate administrative and territorial units, is not an external border of the EU (given that the TRNC is not recognised as a state neighbouring the RoC), the aim of the EU here is to introduce special conditions that ensure the movement of goods and people across the divided island, since northern Cyprus remains effectively outside the EU. In this regard, an unrecognised but de facto boundary has forced the EU to respond in a *sui generis* way. What is more, the interplay between the lack of international recognition on the one hand and the relatively strong empirical statehood of the TRNC becomes very significant. The capacity of the unrecognised state to control its territory and raise a boundary that is, however, not recognised makes the situation more complicated and poses the EU with the challenge to regulate a border, within its territory, that does not formally acknowledge. The rationale of the Green Line Regulation does not leave any room for alternative explanations for this type of engagement, other than the unique geopolitical situation that emanates from the unrecognised state and its border:

‘This suspension [of the *acquis*] makes it necessary to provide for the terms under which the relevant provisions of EU law shall apply to the line between the abovementioned areas [i.e. northern Cyprus] and those areas in which the Government of the Republic of Cyprus exercises effective control.... Since the abovementioned line does not constitute an external border of the EU, special rules concerning the crossing of goods, services and persons need to be established (European Council 2005).

b) Informal engagement with officials from the unrecognised state

Despite the efforts to bypass the TRNC (see also below), the EU has been faced with the need to engage with public authorities, at least to a certain degree. Towards overcoming issues of recognition, there are some unorthodox ways in which the EU and the TRNC work together, which are important for understanding engagement with unrecognised states. The EU deals with authorities of the Turkish Cypriot unrecognised state but this is done in an often discreet way – ‘a platonic relationship’ in the words of a Turkish Cypriot official (interview 2014). As explained before and towards overseeing implementation, the EU could neither work with RoC authorities (which do not control northern Cyprus) nor establish a delegation in the unrecognised TRNC. Instead, they opted for a combination of a Brussels -based Taskforce with a local programme support office (Court of Auditors 2012, 13). This Taskforce initially operated under the Enlargement Directorate General but was soon moved under the then Directorate General for Regional Policy due to Greek Cypriot objections that an Enlargement framework is not appropriate for an EU member state (therefore seeking to highlight that northern Cyprus is part of the RoC, rather than a separate state going through the enlargement process - see also To Vima 2014). On the ground, officials from the two sides often meet in neutral buildings (interview with EU official A’ 2009) rather than buildings that host institutions of the TRNC, like ministries. In addition, the Turkish Cypriots established the EU Coordination Centre (EUCC) in 2003 and, although resembling a lot an EU ministry, it was purposefully manned with technocrats and kept a profile semi-separate from the TRNC administration. The establishment of the EUCC clearly aimed at facilitating interaction between the EU and the TRNC without recognition consequences in very physical terms too, i.e.n offering a neutral building where the two sides could meet (interview with KTTO Member A’ 2009).

Similarly, press releases are often avoided and policy documents or statements refrain from using state terminology– for example, the ‘President’ of the TRNC is referred to as ‘leader’ of the Turkish Cypriots. Yet, EU officials suggest that, in the end, the ‘right people’ for the implementation of the *acquis* are contacted, which implies contact with TRNC authorities (interview with EU official B’ 2009).

Finally, it is important to underline that the EU has ensured it avoids any recognition by implication also because the Greek Cypriots have been very effective in contesting links between the two sides and preventing dealings that might be seen as carrying recognition consequences (see Ker-Lindsay 2012). It is, therefore, clear that the lack of international recognition -such as defining characteristic of unrecognised states-, while it has not stopped engagement with public authorities all together, it is the causal explanation for the series of unique, unofficial links that the EU has chosen to develop with the TRNC. What is more, findings suggest that the presence of rather strong empirical statehood makes engagement even more problematic: where there are developed governments with effective control and the ability to enter into relations with others, the EU will need to make an extra effort to avoid them, rather than in cases where sources of control- and indeed control itself- is more diffused- I elaborate on this in the next section.

c) Replacement of public authorities with non-state actors

The efforts to avoid recognition by implication have also taken the form of prioritising non-state actors as alternative interlocutors. As explained before, the EUCC was quickly established as a semi-official, rather technocratic institution to oversee EU law harmonisation, effectively a ministry of EU integration in all but name. While working closely with the TRNC authorities, the EUCC has kept a more technocratic profile and relative distance from the unrecognised state, to facilitate interaction with the EU free of recognition implications. On the other hand and in the context of the Green Line regulation, the Commission works with the Turkish Cypriot Chamber of Commerce (KTTO) rather than the trade ministry, which would have been the norm in any other case (European Commission 2004). EU officials as well as locals explain that this was done on purpose and so as to avoid recognition of the TRNC authorities (in this case, the trade ministry) by interacting with them (interview with EU official C', KTTO member B' 2009).

d) Extensive engagement with civil society

Within the EU's role in northern Cyprus, special attention is paid to assistance of and engagement with civil society. In a way, this echoes the importance that the EU has given to civil society in more recent years. At the same time, this study seems to confirm existing literature that has found a particular focus on civil society in other cases of unrecognised states (e.g. Berg and Pegg 2016). Members of the EP Group for the Relations with the Turkish Cypriots emphasised that, in order to avoid recognition by implication, the group worked more with non-state actors, including Non-Governmental Organisations (interview with MEP 2009). The fact that even a more political and 'open' institution like the EP was also careful of the diplomatic context testifies to the important impact that issues of recognition have on the nature of EU engagement.

Support to civil society is also one of the major objectives of the Financial Aid Regulation, which includes initiatives that seek to address the way in which the lack of TRNC recognition impacts locals, beyond organised civil society. For example, the Community Scholarships scheme has been an effort to compensate for the fact that universities in northern Cyprus remain unrecognised and cannot take part in exchange programmes, such as Erasmus. Also, the Promotion of Youth Exchanges and Other People to People Contacts recognised that

‘the political situation [and] isolation [of the Turkish Cypriots] resulted a remarkable deficit of knowledge about the European Union [and] it is therefore appropriate to enable the Turkish Cypriots as EU citizens to develop fruitful relations with other EU Member States’ (European Commission 2009).

Finally, the discussion of the EU's engagement would not be complete without a reflection on how this has been perceived by the locals and the impact that might have on the efforts for conflict resolution. Early in the process of accession, the EU's decision to recognise RoC as the only legitimate partner for negotiations led to one of the worst periods in terms of inter-communal relations, with the Turkish Cypriot leadership repeatedly condemning the EU (Republic of Turkey 2017). Years later, even moderate Turkish Cypriots elites continue to regard this decision as a main reason of ongoing Turkish Cypriot mistrust and defensive reaction towards the EU (interview with Turkish Cypriot official 2009). More recently, the fact that issues of recognition have not allowed the EU to meet

'promises' (interviews with various Turkish Cypriot officials 2009 and 2016) of helping the economic development of Turkish Cypriots (e.g. through the pending Trade regulation) has added to the frustration. The public appeal of the EU has decreased in compare to before (Eurobarometer 2018), while some Turkish Cypriot elites continue to be sceptical of the EU. For example, the EU's move to introduce an *ad hoc* committee during the latest inter-communal peace talks in 2016 was met by scepticism by some Turkish Cypriot elites, who feared this might allow Greek Cypriots to control the process of EU law harmonization (interview with Turkish Cypriot official 2016). Particularly less Europhile parts of the political system react with more intransigence to the EU's non-recognition (interview with Turkish Cypriot official 2018). As a result, issues of recognition have created Turkish Cypriot inflexibility and, consequently, posed limitations to the EU's overarching aim of assisting conflict resolution and reaching an agreement.

In summary, the study of the TRNC offers a number of findings that are potentially important for the role of the EU in unrecognised states and suggest that (a) unrecognised borders are managed on an *suis generis* basis, (b) engagement with state officials is informal, c) state authorities are replaced in certain positions by non-state actors and, finally, (d) emphasis is placed on civil society. While instrumental in implementing at least some of the EU proposals for northern Cyprus, those unique ways of EU engagement have done little to assist the resolution of the conflict- in fact they can be seen as potentially harmful to reconciliation (Kyriz 2018). More research on the matter will shed light on whether those ways in which the EU engages with unrecognised states hold for other cases and the impact they might have for conflict resolution. To facilitate this, the next section discusses how the findings of the TRNC are important for similar types of unrecognised states and how they might differ to other variants of the phenomenon.

The Concept of State Avoidance

Why has the EU tried to avoid the TRNC while, in other cases of unrecognised states, like Palestine or Kosovo, has encouraged statehood, also via institution-

building? This section aims to open up the discussion on whether we can explain those differences in EU approaches by looking at variations of statehood across unrecognised states. In order to offer a more nuanced interpretation of the findings of this paper as well as to facilitate more research on the matter, I problematise the concept of unrecognised statehood and I briefly discuss differences between types of unrecognised states, and how the EU deals with them. I do so by largely drawing on the conceptual discussion on sovereignty, which, also through the study of the TRNC, I identify as a prominent condition that shapes the way the EU engages with unrecognised states. I focus on international recognition and empirical statehood, as indicators of two main dimensions of sovereignty: external and internal (see for example Biersteker and Weber 1996, Jackson 2007).

Beginning with international recognition, its lack can be seen as the *sine qua non* characteristic of unrecognised states. Geldenhuys (2009) reflects on these entities as lacking *de jure* recognition, despite what is often effective control of the (unrecognised) government over their declared territory. In this regard, RoC has always been recognised as the only legitimate government in Cyprus, even after the division of the island meant that the government is now controlled by Greek Cypriots. Oppositely, the TRNC suffers from a rather significant deficit of international recognition, since it is only recognised by Turkey. In the previous section, I elaborated on the range of limitations that the non-recognition of the TRNC poses to the EU, including the inability to implement a range of its programmes or plan in the long term. I also explored a range of ways in which the EU has tried to overcome those challenges of recognition, such as informal engagement with state officials, replacement of state authorities by non-state actors or by placing greater emphasis on civil society. Preliminary evidence suggest that the EU emphasises assistance to civil society in other cases with similar deficit of recognition (e.g. Abkhazia, South Ossetia or Transnistria). In this regard, this paper aims to encourage more research on the causality between lack of recognition and prioritisation of non-state actors.

In order to do so, I suggest that the different ways in which the EU has endeavoured in TRNC can be discussed as what I have called a ‘state avoidance’ approach. Scholars, including myself (Kyriss 2018), have before conceptualised the way in which the EU and other actors, like states, have tried to engage with unrecognised states in a way that does not imply recognition. ‘Engagement without recognition’ is an increasingly popular conceptualisation of approaches whereby engagement is pursued without formally recognising the government of a self-declared state^{iv}. Clearly, state avoidance, in the form of managing unrecognised borders *sui generis*, informal links to state authorities and more links to non-state actors and civil society, does not differ much to the concept of engagement without recognition. Yet, the different term here aims to highlight the concept of *state* and to contrast efforts of the EU to *avoid* a state with efforts to *build* a state. In the rest of the paper, I contrast these two, exploring whether the different approaches of the EU nest in differences in terms of statehood, both in terms of recognition and empirical statehood.

While the TRNC remains largely unrecognised, this is not the case with all unrecognised states. Kosovo is recognised by the majority of UN member states and Palestine is the most recognised of existing unrecognised states. What is more, especially in the case of Palestine, there is also quite extensive titular recognition (i.e. the recognition of a right to statehood, see also Crawford 1979). In these cases, the EU seems to engage much more openly and directly. In fact, rather than avoiding the state, the EU has embarked on an effort to build the states of Kosovo and Palestine (e.g. Tansey 2007 on Kosovo, Bouris 2014 on Palestine). Given that the EU’s avoidance of the TRNC directly relates to the lack of recognition, could we explain the greater and more open engagement with Kosovo and Palestine based on the greater extent of recognition? Is the EU more confident to build a state where there is a wish to see one emerge? Those are pressing questions requiring an answer and more research on the matter will help understand the presence of the EU in conditions of contested statehood.

This brings the discussion to the issue of internal sovereignty, i.e. empirical statehood in the form of effectively governing over population and territory. In

both the cases of Kosovo and Palestine, the EU saw a clear deficit in governance when it started being involved, and this created room for the development of state building activities. Yet, what these two cases also share, unlike other unrecognised states, is an implicit or explicit 'titular' recognition, i.e. the recognition of a right to statehood, even from actors that do not recognise a state yet. This is explicit in the EU support of a two-state solution for Palestine and Israel, and a bit more implicit in the case of Kosovo. The fact that the two biggest statebuilding projects of the EU are also the ones that display this type of recognition suggests a link between the two and more research on this front is welcome. It also points to an interesting interrelation between international recognition and empirical statehood, as two dimensions of sovereignty, and the way they shape EU approaches. Indeed, this interrelation was also obvious in the case of the TRNC, albeit in an opposing way: it was the presence of an administration with empirical statehood, control and authority that made all the more difficult for the EU to engage without recognising. In other words, in northern Cyprus, the existence of a clearly defined in terms of population, borders and institutions entity made all the more pressing the EU's need to avoid it. We saw, for example, how the capacity of the TRNC to control its boundary with the recognised RoC forced the EU to come up with *sui generis* measures to regulate the border that it does not formally acknowledge.

It is therefore clear that the relationship between antithetical extremes of low and high degrees of recognition and empirical statehood has some rather interesting stories to tell about unrecognised states, and the role of the EU in them. For that reason and unlike previous conceptualisations of the phenomenon, I argue for broader definitional criteria both in terms of recognition and of empirical statehood. Unlike some previous studies (e.g. Pegg 1998, Caspersen 2012), I include in my definition cases that enjoy extensive yet not full recognition (e.g. Palestine), what we could largely recognise states, in order to highlight potential differences to largely unrecognised states, like the TRNC. Similarly, while previous authors have included the presence of empirical statehood in their definitional criteria (hence another term that is often used is 'de facto states'- see for example Pegg 1998), I argue for definitions

that allow for cases with low degree of empirical statehood (such as when the EU started engaging with institution building in Kosovo and Palestine), in order to test the interrelation of extreme presence and deficit in both recognition and empirical statehood. In this paper for example, we saw empirical statehood playing an important role in the way in which the EU engages, whether there are opportunities for state building or, oppositely, extra pressures to avoid a consolidated state. While this research has focused on the role of the EU and how it is shaped by those conditions of unrecognised statehood, allowing for variation in both international recognition and empirical statehood is potentially useful for studying a range of different issues that might relate to unrecognised states.

Conclusion

The question of how does the EU engage with unrecognised states remains relatively unexplored but hugely important in both academic and policy terms. The constantly increasing conflict management efforts of the EU, and of the international community in more general, has found its way through an archipelago of unrecognised states and a more rigorous conceptualisation of those entities and their relevance to European and international politics is of the greatest importance.

In this regard, a controlled historical analysis of the TRNC uncovered causal links between characteristics of unrecognised statehood and the engagement of the EU in northern Cyprus. Analysis found an approach of what I hereby call state avoidance, defined by a) *sui generis* management of unrecognised borders, b) unofficial meetings with state authorities, c) replacement of state authorities by non-state actors and d) more emphasis on civil society. These elements of EU engagement link directly to the low international recognition and high empirical statehood of the TRNC and the fact that there is a rather developed state-like entity in Cyprus, which the EU needs to try to avoid. This discussion of state avoidance complements studies on state-building, which have focused more on mirror images of the TRNC: cases of more extensive- yet far from full- international recognition but with a greater deficit in empirical statehood when the EU embarked on engagement with them, such as Kosovo or Palestine.

By doing so, this paper aims to encourage more research on cases similar to the TRNC but also unrecognised states with different degrees of international recognition or empirical statehood. To facilitate this and following the discussion of the case study, I argued for a broader conceptualisation of unrecognised states than what is now found in the literature and which includes cases with extensive but still not full recognition and/ or rather underdeveloped state systems. This can encourage comparisons across different types of unrecognised states, both with regard to processes via which their unique characteristics inform EU engagement and issues beyond the focus of this paper. Findings of this article but also the set of further research avenues outlined are crucial if we want to understand international conflict and the limitations or opportunities that contested statehood poses to the promotion of security and stability in European and international politics today and in the future, as well as overcoming those limitations.

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ⁱ Unlike some previous studies, I include in my definition of unrecognised states cases that enjoy extensive yet not full recognition but also rather low empirical statehood, i.e. government and control of territory and population. This is to test the interrelation of extreme presence and deficit in both recognition and empirical statehood and I expand more on definitional issues in the last section of the paper. At the same time, my criterion of lack of UN membership, allows to exclude states that, although not fully recognised are not analytically relevant here- for example, UN members like Israel or the Republic of Cyprus do not enjoy universal recognition strictly speaking. The definition does not include examples of political entities that are part of recognised state structures, even if secession is or has been their objective (e.g. Iraqi Kurdistan, Republika Srpska today) or unrecognised governments rather than states. Lastly, in contested statehood terms and similarly to other works before (e.g. Geldenhuys 2009), the source of contestation here is external, i.e. the international community, rather than internal, e.g. the locals. This is why the term 'unrecognised' states is advanced, although it is very close to how the term 'contested states' has been used by many (e.g. Ker-Lindsay 2012).

ⁱⁱ Based on this definition, Taiwan must also be considered as an unrecognised state, despite being of less relevance to the EU.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on the history of the Cyprus problem, see Castleberry 1964, Joseph 1999, Fisher 2001, Hatzivasileiou 2005. For a more Turkish Cypriot- focused works see Kaymak 2009)

^{iv} For an overview of the debate on 'engagement without recognition' please see the Special Issue of Ethnopolitics, edited by Ker-Lindsay and Berg (2018).